

# Migration and Climate Change

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IOM International Organization for Migration

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# Migration and Climate Change<sup>1</sup>

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## ABBREVIATIONS

IDP	–	Internally Displaced Person
IOM	–	International Organization for Migration
IPCC	–	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
LDC	–	Least Developed Country
MDG	–	Millennium Development Goal
OECD	–	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
SRES	–	Emission Scenarios of the IPCC Special Report on Emission Scenarios
UNFCCC	–	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
UNHCR	–	The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UN-IEHS	–	United Nations Institute for Environment and Human Security
VL	–	<i>visceral leishmaniasis</i>





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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 1990, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) noted that the greatest single impact of climate change could be on human migration—with millions of people displaced by shoreline erosion, coastal flooding and agricultural disruption. Since then various analysts have tried to put numbers on future flows of climate migrants (sometimes called “climate refugees”)—the most widely repeated prediction being 200 million by 2050.

But repetition does not make the figure any more accurate. While the scientific argument for climate change is increasingly confident, the consequences of climate change for human population distribution are unclear and unpredictable. With so many other social, economic and environmental factors at work establishing a linear, causative relationship between anthropogenic climate change and migration has, to date, been difficult.

This may change in future. The available science, summarized in the latest assessment report of the IPCC, translates into a simple fact; on current predictions the “carrying capacity” of large parts of the world will be compromised by climate change.

The meteorological impact of climate change can be divided into two distinct drivers of migration; *climate processes* such as sea-level rise, salinization of agricultural land, desertification and growing water scarcity, and *climate events* such as flooding, storms and glacial lake outburst floods. But non-climate drivers, such as government policy, population growth and community-level resilience to natural disaster, are also important. All contribute to the degree of vulnerability people experience.

The problem is one of time (the speed of change) and scale (the number of people it will affect). But the simplistic image of a coastal farmer being forced to pack up and move to a rich country is not typical. On the contrary, as is already the case with political refugees, it is likely that the burden of providing for climate migrants will be borne by the poorest countries—those least responsible for emissions of greenhouse gases.

Temporary migration as an adaptive response to climate stress is already apparent in many areas. But the picture is nuanced; the ability to migrate is a function of mobility and resources (both financial and social). In other words, the people most vulnerable to climate change are not necessarily the ones most likely to migrate.

Predicting future flows of climate migrants is complex; stymied by a lack of baseline data, distorted by population growth and reliant on the evolution of climate change as well as the quantity of future emissions. Nonetheless this paper sets out three broad scenarios, based on differing emissions forecasts, for what we might expect. These range from the best case scenario where serious emissions reduction takes place and a “Marshall Plan” for adaptation is put in place, to the “business as usual” scenario where the large-scale migration foreseen by the most gloomy analysis comes true, or is exceeded.

Forced migration hinders development in at least four ways; by increasing pressure on urban infrastructure and services, by undermining economic growth, by increasing the risk of conflict and by leading to worse health, educational and social indicators among migrants themselves.

However, there has been a collective, and rather successful, attempt to ignore the scale of the problem. Forced climate migrants fall through the cracks of international refugee and immigration policy—and there is considerable resistance to the idea of expanding the definition of political refugees to incorporate climate “refugees”. Meanwhile, large-scale migration is not taken into account in national adaptation strategies which tend to see migration as a “failure of adaptation”. So far there is no “home” for climate migrants in the international community, both literally and figuratively.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## **A growing crisis**

As early as 1990 the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) noted that the greatest single impact of climate change might be on human migration—with millions of people displaced by shoreline erosion, coastal flooding and agricultural disruption.<sup>3</sup> Since then, successive reports have argued that environmental degradation, and in particular climate change, is poised to become a major driver of population displacement—a crisis in the making.

In the mid-1990s, it was widely reported that up to 25 million people had been forced from their homes and off their land by a range of serious environmental pressures including pollution, land degradation, droughts and natural disasters. At the time it was declared that these “environmental refugees”, as they were called (see Box 1), exceeded all documented refugees from war and political persecution put together.<sup>4</sup>

The *2001 World Disasters Report* of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies repeated the estimate of 25 million current “environmental refugees”. And in October 2005 the UN University’s Institute for Environment and Human Security warned that the international community should prepare for 50 million environmental refugees by 2010.<sup>5</sup>

A few analysts, of whom Norman Myers of Oxford University is perhaps the best known, have tried to estimate the numbers of people who will be forced to move over the long term as a direct result of climate change. “When global warming takes hold” Professor Myers argues, “there could be as many as 200 million people overtaken by disruptions of monsoon systems and other rainfall regimes, by droughts of unprecedented severity and duration, and by sea-level rise and coastal flooding”.<sup>6</sup>

## **200 million climate migrants by 2050?**

Professor Myers’ estimate of 200 million climate migrants by 2050 has become the accepted figure—cited in respected publications from the IPCC to the Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change.<sup>7</sup>

This is a daunting figure; representing a ten-fold increase over today’s entire documented refugee and internally displaced populations.<sup>8</sup> To put the number in perspective it would mean that by 2050 *one in every 45 people* in the world will have

been displaced by climate change. It would also exceed the current global migrant population. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) about 192 million people, or 3 per cent of the world's population, now live outside their place of birth.<sup>9</sup>

But this prediction is still very tentative. Professor Myers himself admits that his estimate, although calculated from the best available data, required some “heroic extrapolations”.<sup>10</sup> Not that any criticism is implied; the simple fact is that nobody really knows with any certainty what climate change will mean for human population distribution. Current estimates range between 25 million and 1 billion people by 2050.<sup>11</sup>

### **A complex, unpredictable relationship**

The scientific basis for climate change is increasingly well established. An enormous amount of time and energy have gone into determining the meteorological impacts of climate change in terms of raised sea levels, altered precipitation patterns and more frequent and fierce storms. Much less time, energy and resources, however, have been spent on empirical analysis of the impacts of climate change on human populations.

Partly, this is because the relationship is so unpredictable: the science of climate change is complex enough – let alone its impact on societies of differing resources and varied capacity to adapt to external shocks. Partly, it is because individual migrants' decisions to leave their homes vary so widely: deciding causality between economic “pull” and environmental “push” is often highly subjective. And finally, disaggregating the role of climate change from other environmental, economic and social factors requires an ambitious analytical step into the dark.

For example, Hurricane Katrina, which lashed the Gulf Coast of the United States in August 2005 and temporarily displaced over a million people,<sup>12</sup> is often presented (quite rightly) as a preview of the kind of more intense and frequent extreme weather events we can expect from climate change. But the hurricane was more than just a meteorological event: the damage it caused was a product of poor disaster planning, consistent underinvestment in the city's protective levees as well the systematic destruction of the wetlands in the Mississippi delta that might have lessened the force of the storm. Labelling it a “climate change event” over-simplifies both its causes and its effects.

Nevertheless, estimates of future numbers of climate change migrants are repeated almost glibly, either for shock value or for want of a better figure.<sup>13</sup> This paper sets out

to challenge the predictions: by trying to pick apart the terminology, the time frame and the degree of uncertainty implicit in them.

Section 2 looks at the ways that climate change might lead to increased migration. Section 3 then analyses some predictions for numbers of future climate migrants, examines some of the uncertainties with these predictions and lays out three different tentative scenarios on future numbers of migrants. Which (if any) of these comes to pass depends on future population growth, distribution and resilience to environmental pressures as well as the ability of the international community to curb greenhouse gas emissions and help the poorest countries adapt to the impacts of climate change. Section 4 assesses the development implications of forced migration within countries and across borders. Finally, Section 5 investigates a variety of international and domestic policy responses to the prospect of large-scale population movements caused by climate change.

#### BOX 1

##### REFUGEE OR MIGRANT?

Labels are important. One immediately contentious issue is whether people displaced by climate change should be defined as “*climate refugees*” or as “*climate migrants*”. This is not just semantics—which definition becomes generally accepted will have very real implications for the obligations of the international community under international law.

Campaigners have long used the phrase “environmental refugee” or “climate refugee” to convey added urgency to the issue. They argue that, in the most literal sense of the words, such people need to “seek refuge” from the impacts of climate change. Any other terminology, they maintain, would downplay the seriousness of these people’s situation. Moreover, the word “refugee” resonates with the general public who can sympathize with the implied sense of duress. It also carries fewer negative connotations than “migrant” which tends to imply a voluntary move towards a more attractive lifestyle.

However, the use of the word “refugee” to describe those fleeing from environmental pressures is not strictly accurate under international law. The United Nations’ 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol relating to the status of refugees are clear that the term should be restricted to those fleeing persecution: “a refugee is a person who owing to a well-founded fear of being per-

secuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country”.<sup>14</sup>

There are other problems with using the term “refugee”. Strictly speaking, categorization as a refugee is reliant on crossing an internationally recognized border: someone displaced within their own country is an “internally displaced person” (IDP). Given that the majority of people displaced by climate change will likely stay within their own borders, restricting the definition to those who cross international borders may seriously understate the extent of the problem. Second, the concept of a “refugee” tends to imply a right of return once the persecution that triggered the original flight has ceased. This is, of course, impossible in the case of sea level rise and so again the term distorts the nature of the problem. Third, there is the concern that expanding the definition of a refugee from political persecution to encompass environmental stressors would dilute the available international mechanisms and goodwill to cater for existing refugees.

The question of definition makes for a hotly contested debate amongst international human rights lawyers.<sup>15</sup> However, in practice there is considerable resistance among the international community to any expansion of the definition of a “refugee”. Developed countries fear that accepting the term refugee would compel them to offer the same protections as political refugees; a precedent that no country has yet been willing to set.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, the international institutions currently charged with providing for refugees, principally the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), are already overstretched and are unable to cope with their current “stock” of refugees.<sup>17</sup> The UNHCR itself is taking on an expanded role in the provision of care to IDPs and so is resistant to any further expansion of its mandate.<sup>18,19</sup>

If the term “climate refugee” is problematic it is still used, in part, for lack of a good alternative. “Climate evacuee” implies temporary movement within national borders (as was the case with Hurricane Katrina). “Climate migrant” implies the “pull” of the destination more than the “push” of the source country and carries negative connotations which reduce the implied responsibility of the international community for their welfare.



But for lack of an adequate definition under international law such migrants are almost invisible in the international system: no institution is responsible for collecting data on their numbers, let alone providing them with basic services. Unable to prove political persecution in their country of origin they fall through the cracks in asylum law.

How then should we categorize these people? The International Organization for Migration (IOM) proposes the following definition, “Environmental migrants are persons or groups of persons, who, for compelling reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes, or chose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad”.<sup>20</sup>

This study mostly uses the term “forced climate migrant” in the knowledge that it is not a universally accepted term but in the hope that it conveys a reasonably accurate impression of the increasing phenomenon of non-voluntary population displacement likely as the impacts of climate change grow and accumulate.

## 2. CLIMATE CHANGE AND FORCED MIGRATION

### Not such a wonderful world

Put simply, climate change will cause population movements by making certain parts of the world much less viable places to live; by causing food and water supplies to become more unreliable and increasing the frequency and severity of floods and storms. Recent reports from the IPCC and elsewhere set out the parameters for what we can expect:

By 2099 the world is expected to be on average **between 1.8°C and 4°C hotter** than it is now.<sup>21</sup> Large areas are expected to become drier—the proportion of land in **constant drought** expected to increase from 2 per cent to 10 per cent by 2050.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, the proportion of land suffering extreme drought is predicted to increase from 1 per cent at present to 30 per cent by the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>23</sup> **Rainfall patterns** will change as the hydrological cycle becomes more intense. In some places this means that rain will be more likely to fall in deluges (washing away top-soil and causing flooding).

Changed rainfall patterns and a more intense hydrological cycle mean that **extreme weather events** such as droughts, storms and floods are expected to become increasingly frequent and severe.<sup>24</sup> For example, it is estimated that the South Asian monsoon will become stronger with up to 20 per cent more rain falling on eastern India and Bangladesh by 2050.<sup>25</sup> Conversely, less rain is expected at low to mid-latitudes; by 2050 sub-Saharan Africa is predicted to have up to 10 per cent less annual rainfall in its interior.<sup>26</sup>

Less rain would have particularly serious impacts for sub-Saharan African **agriculture** which is largely rain-fed: the 2007 IPCC report of the Second Working Group estimates that yields from rain-fed agriculture could fall by up to 50 per cent by 2020.<sup>27</sup> “Agricultural production, including access to food, in many African countries and regions is projected to be severely compromised by climate variability and change” the report notes.<sup>28</sup>

According to the same report **crop yields** in central and south Asia could fall by 30 per cent by the middle of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>29</sup> Some **fish stocks** will migrate towards the poles and colder waters and may deplete as surface water run-off and higher sea temperatures lead to more frequent hazardous algal blooms and coral bleaching.<sup>30</sup> Compounding this, climate change is predicted to worsen a variety of **health problems**

leading to more widespread malnutrition and diarrhoeal diseases, and altered distribution of some vectors of disease transmission such as the malarial mosquito.<sup>31</sup>

Meanwhile, **melting glaciers** will increase the risk of flooding during the wet season and reduce dry-season water supplies to one-sixth of the world's population, predominantly in the Indian sub-continent, parts of China and the Andes.<sup>32</sup> Melting glaciers will increase the risk of **glacial lake outburst floods** particularly in mountainous countries like Nepal, Peru and Bhutan.

Global average **sea level**, after accounting for coastal land uplift and subsidence, is projected to rise between 8 cm and 13 cm by 2030, between 17 cm and 29 cm by 2050, and between 35 cm and 82 cm by 2100 (depending on the model and scenario used).<sup>33</sup> Large delta systems are at particular risk of **flooding**.<sup>34</sup> The **area of coastal wetlands** is projected to decrease as a result of sea level rise. For a high emissions scenario and high climate sensitivity wetland loss could be as high as 25 per cent and 42 per cent of the world's existing coastal wetlands by the 2050s and 2100s respectively.<sup>35</sup>

According to Nicholls and Lowe (2004), using a mid-range climate sensitivity projection, the **number of people flooded** per year is expected to increase by between 10 and 25 million per year by the 2050s and between 40 and 140 million per year by 2100s, depending on the future emissions scenario.<sup>36</sup>

*The avalanche of statistics above translates into a simple fact—that on current trends the “carrying capacity” of large parts of the world, i.e. the ability of different ecosystems to provide food, water and shelter for human populations, will be compromised by climate change.*

## **Climate processes and climate events**

Robert McLeman of the University of Ottawa, unpacks the drivers of forced migration into two distinct groups.<sup>37</sup> First, there are the **climate drivers**. These themselves are of two types – climate processes and climate events. *Climate processes* are slow-onset changes such as sea-level rise, salinization of agricultural land, desertification, growing water scarcity and food insecurity. Sea level rise patently makes certain coastal areas and small island states uninhabitable. Cumulatively they erode livelihoods and change the incentives to “stick it out” in a particular location. Some women in the Sahel, for example, already have to walk up to 25 kilometres a day to fetch water. If their journey gets longer they will simply have to move permanently.<sup>38</sup>

On a national level sea level rise could have serious implications for food security and economic growth. This is a particular concern in countries that have a large part of their industrial capacity under the “one metre” zone. Bangladesh’s Gangetic plain and the Nile Delta in Egypt, which are breadbaskets for both countries, are two such examples. Egypt’s Nile Delta is one of the most densely populated areas of the world and is extremely vulnerable to sea level rise. A rise of just 1 metre would displace at least 6 million people and flood 4,500 km<sup>2</sup> of farmland.<sup>39</sup>

*Climate events*, on the other hand, are sudden and dramatic hazards such as monsoon floods, glacial lake outburst floods, storms, hurricanes and typhoons. These force people off their land much more quickly and dramatically. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, for example, which lashed the Gulf Coast of the United States in August and September 2005 left an estimated 2 million people homeless.<sup>40</sup> The *2000 World Disasters Report* estimated that 256 million people were affected by disasters (both weather-related and geo-physical) in the year 2000, up from an average of 211 million per year during the 1990s – an increase the Red Cross attributes to increased “hydro-meteorological” events.<sup>41</sup>

## **Non-climate drivers**

Equally important though are the **non-climate drivers**. It is clear that many natural disasters are, at least in part, “man-made”. A natural hazard (such as an approaching storm) only becomes a “natural disaster” if a community is particularly *vulnerable* to its impacts. A tropical typhoon, for example, becomes a disaster if there is no early-warning system, the houses are poorly built and people are unaware of what to do in the event of a storm. A community’s vulnerability, then, is a function of its *exposure* to climatic conditions (such as a coastal location) and the community’s *adaptive capacity* (the capacity of a particular community to weather the worst of the storm and recover after it).

Different regions, countries and communities have very different adaptive capacities: pastoralist groups in the Sahel, for example, are socially, culturally and technically equipped to deal with a different range of natural hazards than, say, mountain dwellers in the Himalayas.<sup>42</sup> National and individual wealth is one clear determinant of vulnerability – enabling better disaster risk reduction, disaster education and speedier responses. In the decade from 1994 to 2003 natural disasters in countries of high human development killed an average of 44 people per event, while disasters in countries of low human development killed an average of 300 people each.<sup>43</sup>

On a national scale, Bangladesh has very different adaptive capacities and disaster resilience to the United States. In April 1991 Tropical Cyclone Gorky hit the Chittagong district of south-eastern Bangladesh. Winds of up to 260 kilometres per hour and a six-metre high storm surge battered much of the country killing at least **138,000 people** and leaving as many as 10 million people homeless.<sup>44</sup> The following year in August 1992, a *stronger* storm, the category five Hurricane Andrew, hit Florida and Louisiana with winds of 280 kilometres per hour and a 5.2-metre storm surge. But, while it left US\$ 43 billion in damages in its wake, it caused only **65 deaths**.<sup>45</sup>

Climate change will challenge the adaptive capacities of many different communities, and overwhelm some, by interacting with and exacerbating existing problems of food security, water scarcity and the scant protection afforded by marginal lands. At some point that land becomes no longer capable of sustaining livelihoods and people will be forced to migrate to areas that present better opportunities. The “tipping points” will vary from place to place and from individual to individual. Natural disasters might displace large numbers of people for relatively short periods of time, but the slow-onset drivers are likely to displace permanently many more people in a less-headline grabbing way.

### **Population, poverty, and governance are key variables**

Migration, even forced migration, is not usually just a product of an environmental “push” from a *climate process* like sea level rise. Except in cases of *climate events*, where people flee for their lives, it does require some kind of “pull”: be it environmental, social or economic. There has to be the hope of a better life elsewhere, however much of a gamble it might be. Past environmental migratory movements, such as in the US Dust Bowl years in the 1930s (see Box 3), suggest that being able to migrate away from severe climatic conditions, in this case prolonged drought, requires would-be migrants to have some “social and financial capital” such as existing support networks in the destination area and the funds to be able to move.<sup>46</sup>

It also should be mentioned, and this is absent from much of the campaigning literature, that climate change will make some places *better able* to sustain larger populations. This is particularly reflected in predictions for less-severe total temperature rises, i.e. 2 to 3°C over the 21<sup>st</sup> century rather than rise of 4 to 5 degrees or more. This is for three main reasons. First, higher temperatures will likely extend growing seasons and reduce frost risk in mid to high-latitude areas such as Europe, Australia and New Zealand and make new crops viable (already vineyards are spreading north in

Britain).<sup>47</sup> Second, the “fertilization effect” of more CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere is predicted to increase crop yields and the density of vegetation in some areas.<sup>48</sup> And third, altered rainfall patterns mean that rain might increase in areas previously suffering water stress. A 2005 study, for example, predicts that a warmer north Atlantic and hotter Sahara will trigger more rain for the Sahel.<sup>49</sup> It is not inconceivable then that there might be migration in order to take advantage of the effects of climate change.

In other words, climate change might provide both “push” and “pull” for some population displacement. This is not to downplay the seriousness of climate change: above 4 or 5°C the predicted impacts of climate change become almost universally negative.<sup>50</sup> But it is to make that point that the role of climate change in population displacement is not a linear relationship of cause and effect, of environmental “push” and economic “pull”.

Non-climatic drivers remain a key variable. It is, after all, population growth, income distribution and government policy that push people to live on marginal lands in the first place. In other words a community’s vulnerability to climate change is not a constant – it can be increased or decreased for reasons that have nothing to do with greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>51</sup> In this sense it is the non-climatic drivers (that put vulnerable people in marginal situations) that can be as important a determinant of the problem as the strength of the “climate signal” itself.

As Steve Lonergan of the University of Victoria, Canada, noted in 1998, “there is too often an uncritical acceptance of a direct causal link between environmental degradation and population displacement. Implicit in these writings is the belief that environmental degradation—as a possible cause of population displacement—can be separated from other social, economic or political causes. It must be recognized that the degradation of the environment is socially and spatially constructed; only through a structural understanding of the environment in the broader political and cultural context of a region or country can one begin to understand the “role” it plays as a factor in population movement”.<sup>52</sup>

Intuitively we can see how climate change might play a role in future movements of people. But putting empirically sound figures on the extent of the problem is complex. And it is hard to persuade decision makers to take the issue seriously without being able to wave concrete figures in front of them. This is the subject of the next section.

### 3. PREDICTIONS

*“Prediction is very difficult, especially about the future.”*

Niels Bohr, Danish physicist (1885-1962)

#### **Climate migration is not new**

Archaeological evidence suggests that human settlement patterns have responded repeatedly to changes in the climate.<sup>53,54</sup> There is evidence that the emergence of the first large, urban societies was driven by a combination of climatic and environmental desiccation. The complex societies of Egypt and Mesopotamia, for example, emerged as people migrated away from desiccating rangelands and into riverine areas. The resulting need to organize densely packed populations in order to manage scarce resources in restricted areas has been identified as one of the main driving forces behind the development of the first civilizations.<sup>55</sup>

Much later, during the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, growing aridity and frigid temperatures from a prolonged cold snap caused the Hun and German hordes to surge across the Volga and Rhine into milder Gaul and eventually led to the sack of Rome by the Visigoths. Likewise, the 8<sup>th</sup> century Muslim expansion into the Mediterranean and southern Europe was, to some extent, driven by drought in the Middle East.<sup>56</sup>

#### **Existing patterns of climate migration**

Migration is (and always has been) an important mechanism to deal with climate stress. Pastoralist societies have of course habitually migrated, with their animals, from water source to grazing lands in response to drought as well as part of their normal mode of life. But it is becoming apparent that migration as a response to environmental change is not limited to nomadic societies.

In western Sudan, for example, studies have shown that one adaptive response to drought is to send an older male family member to Khartoum to try and find paid labour to tide the family over until after the drought.<sup>57</sup> Temporary migration in times of climate stress can help top-up a family’s income (through remittances from paid work elsewhere) and reduce the draw on local resources (fewer mouths to feed).

When climate stresses coincide with economic or social stresses, the potential for forced migration from rural areas increases significantly. But the picture is nuanced. In West Africa, the distance that people migrate is a function of their family's resources; in really bad drought years they can not afford to travel far and instead try to find paid work in local cities (see Box 2). Known locally as “eating the dry season” it occurs today in many parts of drought-stricken West Africa.

## BOX 2

### “EATING THE DRY SEASON” – TEMPORARY LABOUR MIGRATION IN WEST AFRICA

In the West African Sahel recent studies have cast light on the use of temporary migration as an adaptive mechanism to climate change. The region has suffered a prolonged drought for much of the past three decades and one way that households have adapted is by sending their young men and women in search of wage labour after each harvest.<sup>58</sup> But *how far* they travel depends, in part, on the success of the harvest.

A good harvest might give the family sufficient resources to send a member to Europe in search of work. While the potential rewards in terms of remittances are high, it is a highly speculative gamble – in addition to dangerous journey, the rewards are uncertain. In addition the chances are the migrant will not be back in time for the next year's planting.

But in a drought year, when harvests are poor, the young men and women tend to stay much closer to home, instead travelling to nearby cities for paid work so as to reduce the drain on the household's food reserves and top-up household income. In such years the risk of losing the “migration gamble” is simply too great.<sup>59</sup>

The ability to migrate is, by definition, a function of mobility. In the 1930s Dustbowl Years in the US, migrants from the Great Plains tended to be tenant farmers without strong ancestral or financial ties to the land (see Box 3).<sup>60</sup> The decision to migrate is normally taken at a household level (unless the state is clearing an area) – and relies on individual calculations of social and financial capital. Migration is typically not the first adaptive response households take when confronted by climate stress; rather it resorted to when other means of adaptation (such as selling livestock) are insufficient to meet their immediate needs and often when their communities or governments have proven incapable of giving assistance.



Migration, especially when it is a response to slower-acting climate processes (rather than a sudden climatic event like a hurricane), typically requires access to money, family networks and contacts in the destination country. Even in the most extreme, unanticipated natural disasters – migrants, if they have any choice, tend to travel along pre-existing paths – to places where they have family, support networks, historical ties and so on. Most people displaced by environmental causes will find new homes within the boundaries of their own countries. Evacuees from Hurricanes Rita and Katrina, for example, did not stream across the border to Mexico but typically found temporary refuge with family members elsewhere in the country.<sup>61</sup>

### BOX 3 THE DUST BOWL YEARS

During the 1930s, multiple years of below-average rainfall and above-average temperatures in the Great Plains of the United States coincided with a nation wide economic slump (the Great Depression) and resulted in the widespread failure of small farms, particularly those on marginal lands. It is believed that up to 300,000 “Okies” left the region during the “Dust Bowl” decade– many of them migrating to California.<sup>62</sup>

Migrants to California from the Great Plains mostly consisted of intact nuclear families of above-average education, from a range of occupational backgrounds, and who had extended family support waiting for them in California. They also tended to be tenant farmers without the same ancestral investment in their land as the landowners who were more likely to stay behind.<sup>63</sup>

The clichéd image of a coastal farmer getting inundated by rising sea levels and being forced to pack up and move to a rich country is simply not born out by experience. The 2004 Asian Tsunami, for example, killed more than 200,000 people and displaced twice as many. But those people were largely not displaced to OECD countries. Instead the burden of displacement (and of providing for evacuees) is overwhelmingly born by the local region.

Those who cannot, or choose not to, find new homes within their own country tend to seek refuge in places where they have existing cultural or ethnic ties. So Bangladeshis might seek refuge in India or Pakistan, Indonesians from Sumatra would look to Malaysia and so on.<sup>64</sup> Likewise, inter-continental migration is most likely to follow

pre-existing paths and old colonial relationships. So the United Kingdom might be an obvious destination for Pakistanis and West Indians, France for would-be migrants from Francophone West Africa and Australia and New Zealand for some groups in the South Pacific.

In short, people have had to move for environmental reasons for thousands of years. But recent examples provide useful, albeit sobering, analogues for the likely impact of future climate change. The 1998 monsoon floods in Bangladesh brought some of the worst flooding in living memory, inundating two-thirds of the country for two months, devastating its infrastructure and agricultural base and leading to fears about the country's long-term future in a world of higher ocean levels and more intense cyclones.<sup>65</sup> The floods left an estimated 21 million people homeless.<sup>66</sup> Meanwhile the Yangtze floods of the same year temporarily displaced an estimated 14 million people and triggered the largest ever peace-time deployment of the People's Liberation Army to provide humanitarian aid and rebuild critical infrastructure.<sup>67</sup> However, it is one thing to reflect on past and present climate-triggered population movements and quite another to predict accurate figures for future population displacement.

## **The problem of prediction**

Although meteorological science and climate modelling techniques have progressed dramatically over the past decade, we still cannot accurately predict the impact of climate change on our weather systems. Amongst much else there is uncertainty about the way rainfall patterns will change and continuing debate on whether global warming will lead to more frequent and fierce hurricanes.<sup>68</sup>

So far, and quite understandably, the focus of the scientific community has been on establishing the biophysical extent and nature of anthropogenic climate change. Less time and energy have gone into predicting the impact of future climate change on human societies in any more than the most general terms. The complex interactions between different meteorological and social factors make cause and effect models tricky and often inappropriate. Consequently, the figures that analysts have produced to date are little more than well-educated guesswork. Developing more solid predictions will require a lot of hard number-crunching that is only really starting now.<sup>69</sup>

These predictions are complicated by three factors:

- First, forced climate migration will take place against a background of unprecedented changes in the number and distribution of the world's population. The global population is currently growing at a rate of 1.1 per cent and is

predicted to reach 9.075 billion by 2050 (from its 2005 level of 6.54 billion). Meanwhile, there is an accelerating move to urban areas. Already 49 per cent of the world's population live in cities, and the growth rate of the urban population is nearly double (2%) that of total population growth.<sup>70</sup>

These trends are especially pronounced in low and middle-income countries. Between 2005 and 2010 Burundi, for example, is expected to have a population growth rate of 3.7 per cent and an urban growth rate of 6.8 per cent.<sup>71</sup> Meanwhile, the Sahelian region of northern Nigeria, perhaps the area of the country most susceptible to climate change, is already characterized by high population growth (about 3.1%) and rapid urbanization (about 7%).<sup>72</sup> Clearly it would be absurd to attribute the entire urban drift to climate change, but disaggregating what role climate change might play in added rural-urban migration is speculative.

- Second, we have no real base-line figure for current migratory movements. Nor is there much capacity in developing countries or the international community to gather this sort of data, particularly for internal migration. What limited capacity exists is focused on tracking cross-border migration. Given that a majority of forced climate migrants will stay within their own borders (see page 22) the machinery to collect data on these movements simply does not yet exist. Recent initiatives such as the EACH-FOR project of the European Commission are only now beginning to try to address this statistical gap (see Box 5).
- Third, what happens in the second half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century depends to a great extent on what we do today. Until 2050 the degree of inertia in the climate system means that climate change over the next 50 years is largely pre-determined.<sup>73</sup> However, the extent and nature of climate change after then is reliant on current emissions. Consequently, many analysts think that it is highly speculative to try to push predictions past 2050.<sup>74</sup>

## **The climate canaries**

Nonetheless, there has been a somewhat breathless competition in the world's media to find the first conclusive "victims" of climate change – who, like a miner's canary, will mark the beginning of a period of irreversible climate impacts. Four cases have been quite extensively highlighted in the past few years: the Cartaret islands in Papua New Guinea, the residents of Lateu village in Vanuatu, the relocation of Shishmaref village on Sarichef island in Alaska, and the submergence of Lohachara island in India's Hooghly river.

In 2005 it was officially decided to evacuate the 1,000 residents of the Carteret Islands, a group of small and low-lying coral atolls administered by Papua New Guinea. Storm-related erosion and salt water intrusion had rendered the population almost entirely dependent on outside aid. Ten families at a time are now being moved to the larger island of Bougainville, 100 kilometres away.<sup>75</sup>

A second group of about a hundred residents of Lateu, on the island of Tegua on Vanuatu, were relocated farther inland, again following storm-damage, erosion and salt damage to their original village. In both cases, the declaration of their status as “the first climate change refugees” was timed to coincide with the United Nations Climate Convention meeting in November 2005.<sup>76</sup>

Shishmaref village lies on Sarichef island just north of the Bering strait. A combination of melting permafrost and sea-shore erosion at a rate of up to 3.3 metres a year have forced the inhabitants to relocate their village several kilometres to the south.<sup>77</sup> It is thought that climate change has directly exacerbated the sea-erosion by thinning the sea ice which used to reduce the force of local tides and erosive currents.

In December 2006 there were widespread reports of the first submergence of an inhabited island due to climate change. Researchers reported that Lohachara island in the Hooghly river delta, once home to 10,000 people, and which had first started flooding 20 years ago, had finally been entirely submerged. One of a number of vanishing islands in the delta, the loss of the islands and other coastal land in the delta has left thousands of people homeless.<sup>78</sup>

However, in the interests of balance, it is worth noting that there is little scientific consensus that these four cases are definitively the result of anthropogenic climate change. Fred Terry, director of the UNDP’s programme in Bougainville argues that in the case of the Carteret Islands dynamite fishing has destroyed the natural protection offered by the reef, whilst natural subsidence and tectonic movement might also explain the islands’ inundation. In fact plans to evacuate the residents have been discussed since the early 1980s, but were interrupted by the war on the neighbouring Papua New Guinean island of Bougainville.<sup>79</sup> Likewise, Lohachara island, a sandbar in the Hooghly delta (and so inherently unstable), was eroded by river currents, weakened by mangrove destruction, and submerged by tectonic titling and local subsidence.<sup>80</sup>

So far the publicized examples of forced migration caused by anthropogenic climate change are more anecdotal than empirical, affecting a few hundred or thousand people at a time. The urge to grab the headlines has tended to obscure the fact that we know that climate variation has influenced human population distribution for thousands of years. But while the evidence for a distinctively anthropogenic “climate

change signal” in forced migration so far is circumstantial, it is mounting. And with all available scenarios predicting accelerating climate change impacting growing populations and more people living on marginal land, forced climate migration is certain to increase. The important questions are; by how much? and with what implications for development?

### **The good, the bad, and the (very) ugly: Climate migrant scenarios**

The impact of climate change as a driver of future forced migration depends on several factors:

- the quantity of future greenhouse gas emissions;
- the rate of future population growth and distribution;
- the meteorological evolution of climate change;
- the effectiveness of local and national adaptation strategies.

The IPCC has devised a series of scenarios, called the Emission Scenarios of the IPCC Special Report on Emission Scenarios (or SRES for short), which set out a range of different future emissions scenarios varied according to demographic, technological and economic developments. There are six basic “storylines”; each of which aggregates different rates of population and economic growth as well as the future “energy mix”. For reference, these storylines are described in Annex 1. They range from the most-greenhouse gas intensive (A1F1 – where energy is mostly derived from fossil fuels and economic growth is rapid) to the less-intensive B1 storyline (where the world economy moves towards less-resource intensity and cleaner technology). All the scenarios assume no additional climate change initiatives such as the emissions targets under the Kyoto Protocol. Three of the SRES scenarios are used here as starting points to imagine three *highly speculative* scenarios for future climate-induced migration.<sup>81</sup>

### **The good**

The first (B1) is the best case scenario. Its impact is relatively low but so also is its likelihood. The B1 storyline describes a world whose population peaks mid-century around 9 billion and declines thereafter towards 7 billion. There is a rapid change in economic structures towards a service and information economy with a reduction in material intensity and the introduction of clean and resource efficient technologies. “The emphasis is on global solutions to economic, social and environmental sustainability, including improved equity, but without additional climate initiatives”.<sup>82</sup>

In addition (and this is where this scenario diverges from the B1 storyline) we can imagine that a serious post 2012 regime is put in place by the international community to reduce carbon emissions. The BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China) join as full members and work to cut their own emissions. Atmospheric concentrations of CO<sub>2</sub> stabilize around 600 ppm by end of century leading to temperature rise over the century of around 1.8 degrees and sea level rise of from 18 to 38 cm.<sup>83</sup> In addition a “Marshall plan” for adaptation helps countries deal with the worst impacts of climate change.

Nonetheless, according to the Stern report, such a temperature rise would still lead to a 20 to 30 per cent decrease in water availability in some vulnerable regions such as Southern Africa and the Mediterranean countries. It would also result in declining crop yields in tropical regions. In Africa crop yields could be cut by between 5 to 10 per cent.<sup>84</sup> Meanwhile up to 10 million more people would be affected by coastal flooding each year.<sup>85</sup>

In this case the headline figure for climate migration (the 200 million “climate refugees” by 2050) might, in hindsight, seem like an exaggeration. Instead we could expect increased migration of between 5 and 10 per cent along existing routes (see page 21). There would be increased rural to urban migration but it would prove largely manageable, if not indistinguishable, within existing patterns of migration.

## **The bad**

Our second scenario uses the “A1B” storyline as its starting point. A1B envisages a world of very rapid economic growth, with a global population that peaks mid-century and declines thereafter, as well as the swift up-take of new and more efficient technologies. The scenario predicts economic convergence among regions, increased social and cultural interactions and a substantial reduction in regional differences in per capita income. In this scenario the world’s energy is sourced from a balance between fossil intensive and non-fossil energy sources.<sup>86</sup> We can imagine that international efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions are delayed, patchy and not particularly effective. Some effort and funds are invested into adaptation, but not enough.

The estimate for temperature rise over the 21<sup>st</sup> century for the A1B storyline is 2.4°C (with a likely range from 1.7°C to 4.4°C). Atmospheric concentrations of CO<sub>2</sub> by the end of the century are 850 ppm (three times pre-industrial levels).<sup>87</sup> With higher temperatures the practical implications of climate change are much greater. Under

this scenario sea level rise would be between 21 cm and 48 cm and precipitation in sub-tropical areas would fall by up to 20 per cent.<sup>88</sup> According to the Stern report, a 3°C temperature rise would mean 1 to 4 billion people would suffer water shortages and between 150 to 550 additional million people would be at risk of hunger. Conversely other areas would gain unwelcome water with coastal flooding affecting between 11 and 170 million additional people each year.<sup>89</sup> Marginal lands would become increasingly uninhabitable, with dramatic increases in internal rural to urban migration and also emigration to richer countries, particularly of young, skilled people. Meanwhile, millions of people would be temporarily displaced by individual extreme weather events.

## **The ugly**

The third scenario uses the A1F1 storyline as its starting point. A1F1 is similar to A1B in that it forecasts rapid economic growth and a global population that peaks mid-century and falls thereafter. However, unlike A1B, energy in the A1F1 world continues to be overwhelmingly sourced from fossil-fuel supplies – and is a “business as usual scenario” without any Kyoto emission reductions or serious attempts at adaptation.<sup>90</sup> On this trend, atmospheric concentration of CO<sub>2</sub> by 2099 will be 1,550 ppm: five times pre-industrial levels and four times current levels.

Such CO<sub>2</sub> levels would result in a temperature rise over the century of 4.0°C (with a likely range from 2.4°C to 6.4°C) and sea level rise from 29 cm to 59 cm.<sup>91</sup> According to the Stern report a temperature rise of 4.0°C would result in a 30 to 50 per cent decrease in water availability in Southern Africa and Mediterranean. Agricultural yields would decline by 15 to 35 per cent in Africa and entire regions, such as parts of Australia, would fall out of production.<sup>92</sup> With high climate sensitivity, the number of people flooded per year could be as many as 160 million by the 2050s and 420 million by the 2100s.<sup>93</sup>

Under this scenario, predictions of 200 million people displaced by climate change might easily be exceeded. Large areas of southern China, South Asia, and the Sahelian region of sub-Saharan Africa could become uninhabitable on a permanent basis. Climate forced migration would be unmistakable with tens of millions of people at a time displaced by extreme weather events, such as floods, storms and glacial lake outburst floods, and many millions more displaced by climate processes like desertification, salinization of agricultural land and sea level rise.

The above scenarios all assume a roughly linear evolution of climate change. But the picture would change again in the case of abrupt climate change such as the collapse of the Gulf Stream or melting of the Greenland or Antarctic ice sheets. The IPCC estimates that the elimination of the Greenland ice sheet would lead to a contribution to a sea level rise of about 7 m.<sup>94</sup> The Stern report estimated that the melting or collapse of the ice sheets would raise sea levels and eventually threaten 4 million km<sup>2</sup> of land which is currently home to 5 per cent (around 310 million people) of the world's population.<sup>95</sup>



## 4. DEVELOPMENT IMPLICATIONS

There is irony in the fact that it is the developing countries—the least responsible for emissions of greenhouse gases—will be the most affected by climate change. If the situation with refugees from war and political persecution is any indication they will also bear the greatest burden of providing for forced climate migrants. For example, in 2000, the 20 countries with the highest ratios of official refugees had an annual per-capita income of just US\$ 850.<sup>96</sup>

### **Assessing regional vulnerabilities**

Numerically and geographically, South and East Asia are particularly vulnerable to large-scale forced migration. This is because sea level rise will have a disproportionate effect on their large populations living in low-lying areas. Six of Asia's ten mega-cities are located on the coast (Jakarta, Shanghai, Tokyo, Manila, Bangkok and Mumbai).<sup>97</sup> China, meanwhile, has 41 per cent of its population, 60 per cent of its wealth and 70 per cent of its megacities in coastal areas.<sup>98</sup>

Millions more are vulnerable in Africa, particularly around the Nile Delta and along the west coast of Africa. Changed patterns of rainfall would have particularly serious impacts for food security in sub-Saharan Africa. According to the latest IPCC report reduced rainfall could lower crop yields by as much as 20 per cent by 2020, leading to increased malnutrition.<sup>99</sup>

Small island states around the world are particularly vulnerable to sea level rise because in many cases (the Bahamas, Kiribati, the Maldives and the Marshall Islands) much of their land is less than three or four metres above present sea level.<sup>100</sup> One 1999 analysis estimated that, by 2080, flood risk for people living in small island states will be 200 times greater than if there had been no global warming.<sup>101</sup> Other island states tend to have high levels of development and high density population around their coasts. Half the population of the Caribbean, for example, lives within 1.5 km of the shoreline.<sup>102</sup>

### **Forced migration and development**

Over the short term, climate change forced migration will make the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) harder to achieve.<sup>103</sup> Over the long term, large-scale

climate change migration could roll back much of the progress that has been made so far. Particularly threatened is the uninterrupted provision of the education and health services that underlie goals 2 (universal primary education) and goals 4 and 5 (reducing child and maternal mortality and combating HIV/Aids, malaria and other diseases).

Forced migration hinders development in at least four ways; by increasing pressure on urban infrastructure and services, undermining economic growth, increasing the risk of conflict and leading to worse health, educational and social indicators among migrants themselves.

What impact climate change migration ultimately has on development depends, of course, on which of the above storylines (page 26) plays out: it is clear that 200 million people displaced by climate change would be much more detrimental to development than 10 million. There is also a large difference in development outcomes between those displaced by long-term climate processes (sea level rise) and short-term climate events (storms). Aggregated figures for forced climate migration mask this distinction.

## **4.1 The urban flood**

Increasing food and water scarcity due to climate change in rural areas will accelerate the dramatic rural-urban drift in the developing world. Urban areas offer access to the cash economy (rather than subsistence farming) and can make it easier to provide services. However, rapid and unplanned urbanization has serious implications for urban welfare and urban service provision.

Already, one-third of the world's urban population, about 1 billion people, live in slums: in poor quality housing with limited clean water, sanitation and education services.<sup>104</sup> By 2030 it is estimated that this number will rise to 1.7 billion people.<sup>105</sup> High population densities and high contact rates help to spread disease, while health and education services are often inadequate. In India, for example, unplanned urbanization has been associated with the spread of dengue fever.<sup>106</sup>

## **4.2 Hollowed economies**

Mass migration disrupts production systems and undermines domestic markets. In addition, the loss of "human capital" in the form of the labour force and investment

in education undermines economic growth. This can establish a self-reinforcing of limited economic opportunity that contributes to future migration.

The “brain drain” effect from developing countries is already a serious problem. One of the legacies of the 1930s Dust Bowl case was that those who fled the drought were young, skilled families with some money and strong social networks – the very kind of people that are essential components of successful communities. “The places they left behind”, says Ottawa University’s Robert McLeman, “became increasingly polarized between affluent property owners and an impoverished underclass, a downward spiral from which some communities never recovered. Future climate-migration holds a similar potential to have negative long-term consequences for socio-economic stability in affected areas”.<sup>107</sup> Climate change could accelerate the brain drain as it is typically those with larger reserves of financial and social capital who are able to move away.

### **4.3 Political instability and ethnic conflict**

Large-scale population displacement will redraw the ethnic map of many countries, bringing previously separate groups into close proximity with each other and in competition for the same resources. In the context of poor governance, poverty and easy access to small arms these situations can easily turn violent. In Nigeria, 3,500 square kilometres (1,350 square miles) of land are turning into desert every year, making desertification the country’s leading problem. As the desert advances, farmers and herdsmen are forced to move, either squeezing into the shrinking area of habitable or forced into the already overcrowded cities.<sup>108</sup> There is also a fairly widely-held belief that the current crisis in Darfur has its origins in the extended drought that brought pastoralists into competition with farmers.<sup>109</sup>

Large population movements are already recognized by the UN Security Council as constituting a potential threat to international peace and security, particularly if there are existing ethnic and social tensions.<sup>110</sup> According to John Ashton, the UK’s climate change envoy, “Massive migrations, particularly in the arid or semi-arid areas in which more than a third of the world’s people live, will turn fragile states into failed states and increase the pressure on regional neighbours – a dynamic that is already apparent in Africa”.<sup>111</sup>

## 4.4 Health impacts and welfare of forced migrants

Population displacement undermines the provision of medical care and vaccination programmes; making infectious diseases harder to deal with and more deadly. It is well documented that refugee populations suffer worse health outcomes than settled populations. Forced migrants, especially forced to flee quickly from climate events, are also at greater risk of sexual exploitation, human trafficking and sexual and gender-based violence.<sup>112</sup>

Forced migration in response to climate stresses can also spread epidemic disease. Visceral leishmaniasis (VL) is one example. VL is a widespread parasitic disease with a global incidence of 500,000 new human cases each year. In northeastern Brazil, periodic epidemic waves of VL have been associated with migrations to urban areas after long periods of drought.<sup>113</sup>

### BOX 4

#### CLIMATE CHANGE MIGRATION: A GENDER PERSPECTIVE<sup>114</sup>

Far from being gender-neutral, climate change, and the use of migration as a coping mechanism, will have specific gendered impacts, given that there is a “strong relationship between poverty and vulnerability to environmental change, and the stark fact that women, as a group, are poorer and less powerful than men”.<sup>115</sup>

For example, when rural families attempt to address environmental stress by having a member of their family migrate to the city to earn an income and thus shift direct reliance on climate-dependent natural resources, the effect on women and gender dynamics is complex. On the one hand, women left behind by male migrants may experience more autonomy and have greater decision-making power because they become *de facto* household heads after their husbands migrate.<sup>116</sup> Male outmigration can also enhance the economic situation of the household left behind through remittances,<sup>117</sup> which have grown dramatically in recent years and exceed official development aid in some developing countries.<sup>118</sup>

On the other hand, however, male outmigration can exacerbate the poverty of rural women. As Sylvia Chant explains, “the fragile resource base of some *de facto* female-headed units may be compounded by low reserves of labour

or the inability to mobilize labour on account of social taboos regarding women's access to machinery and participation in certain agricultural tasks."<sup>119</sup> Furthermore, Chant notes, for example in both Bangladesh and Pakistan, that even with male outmigration, "women may not be able to take major decisions over household production or livelihoods in the home village itself without first obtaining permission from their absent partners or his natal kin."<sup>120</sup>

In Africa, many men are migrant workers (or work seekers) in their own or other countries but faced with natural disasters and a diminishing resource base, women may seek to migrate as well, usually to urban centres.<sup>121</sup> While lone women migrants will face similar challenges to their male counterparts in finding employment, affordable housing, and accessing social services, they may have a more difficult time due to gender-based discrimination.<sup>122</sup> This is evident in the case of women from the village of Kallayaran in Peru, where, as unskilled peasant labour, they have limited opportunities to work in the formal sectors of urban centres, and primarily find work in low-paid domestic services.<sup>123</sup>

While it is difficult to make predictions about how communities will adapt to climate change, the nature of migration as a result, and repercussions for gender dynamics and women's lives, it is essential nonetheless to recognize that climate change will have gender specific impacts, and, critically, to mainstream a gender perspective into climate change discussions.

## 5. POLICY RESPONSES

### Heads in the sand

Despite the serious development implications of large-scale forced climate migration international capacity and interest in dealing with it is limited.<sup>124</sup> Bold speeches and elaborate commitments to the pursuit of noble goals like refugee rights, environmental protection and sustainable development typically fall prey to narrow geopolitical interests when the time for action comes. The result is that forced climate migrants fall through the cracks of international refugee and immigration policy. There is no “home” for forced climate migrants, either literally or figuratively.

Instead, there is a collective, and rather successful, attempt to ignore the scale of the problem. Until now the international community has largely focused on mitigating climate change by setting emissions targets for OECD countries and agonising about how to bring it new members to a post-Kyoto 2012 framework. More recently, greater attention has been paid to helping countries adapt to the impacts of climate change. But this approach to adaptation is fundamentally based on the idea of adapting “in situ”. Migration is seen as a failure of adaptation.

Potential progress can be divided into three, quite distinct, areas. I say “potential” here as there has not been real progress on any front – yet. First is the legal-political approach to expand the definition of a refugee under current international law. Second is the extent to which forced migration is being incorporated into current domestic plans for climate change adaptation. Third is whether the OECD countries are willing to open their “immigration gates” to climate migrants.

### 5.1. Expanding the definition of a “refugee”

There have been some attempts to broaden the existing definition of a political refugee to include those displaced for environmental reasons or to write a new convention that specifically protects such people.<sup>125</sup> The lack of an accepted definition of an environmental refugee means that, unless they’re relocated by extreme weather events, their displacement does not trigger any access to financial grants, food aid, tools, shelter, schools or clinics.

As a result there is no structural capacity in the international system to provide for environmental migrants. Climate migrants are not recognized as a problem in any binding international treaty nor is there an international body charged with providing for climate migrants, or even counting them. Instead the default response of OECD donor countries to extreme weather events is to give humanitarian aid and invest in early warning systems.

In 2005 the Director of the UN University Institute for Environment and Human Security, Janos Bogardi, argued, “there are well-founded fears that the number of people fleeing untenable environmental conditions may grow exponentially as the world experiences the effects of climate change and other phenomena. This new category of “refugee” needs to find a place in international agreements. We need to better anticipate support requirements, similar to those of people fleeing other unviable situations”.<sup>126</sup>

In August 2006 a meeting of NGOs and some affected countries was held in the Maldives to discuss how an expanded definition might be worked into international law. Inclusion within current refugee law would bring the existing weight of international law and precedent to act on the issue – and would trigger certain obligations on the part of other countries being forced to act refugees. However, since then the process has faltered and it is hard to foresee any realistic consensus on an expanded definition (see Box 1, page 13).<sup>127</sup>

#### BOX 5

##### THE EACH-FOR PROJECT<sup>128</sup>

The Environmental Change and Forced Migration Project (EACH-FOR) is an attempt to address the statistical gap in our understanding of climate migration. Funded by the European Commission its multi-disciplinary team is made up of seven different research organizations spread across Europe. Over two years starting in mid 2007 they aim to support European policy with “forced migration” scenarios, analysis of the direct (e.g. desertification) and indirect (e.g. conflicts) environmental effects on livelihoods and the preparation of statistical indicators to measure environmental refugee flows.

## 5.2 Adaptation in affected countries

As climate change advances, individual countries will have to make a series of cost-benefit decisions on what they want to protect; building sea walls here, staging managed retreats from eroding shorelines there. The resources and foresight at the disposal of national politicians will define how much each country is affected by climate change, including how many of its population are forced to move.

Domestic policy remains a key variable in disaster risk reduction and population distribution (page 19). With the right kind of adaptation countries can reduce their vulnerability to the impacts of climate *events* and manage the evolution of climate *processes*. Cuba, for example, lies directly in a hurricane path but suffers less from hurricanes than its neighbours because of careful preparation, effective early warning systems and widespread storm education.

But few countries are putting any plans in place for the prospect of large-scale forced climate migration. The UNFCCC has supported the development of National Adaptation Programmes of Action (NAPA) which are supposed to help the LDCs identify and rank their priorities for adaptation to climate change.<sup>129</sup> However, none of the 14 submitted so far (Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burundi, Cambodia, Comoros, Djibouti, Haiti, Kiribati, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritania, Niger, Samoa, Senegal) mentions migration or population relocation as a possible policy response.<sup>130</sup>

Of course migration may be the only possible adaptive response in the case of some of the Small Island and low-lying states where rising seas will eventually flood large parts of the country. Andrew Simms of the New Economics Foundation points out that domestic level responses are, in some cases, an absurd proposition given that the national level might be under water.<sup>131</sup>

Migration is typically seen as a failure of adaptation, not a form of it. There are precedents though. Between 1984-5 the Ethiopian government resettled tens of thousands of people from drought-stricken areas.<sup>132</sup> Two decades later the Asian Tsunami gave new impetus to plans in the Maldives to organize a “staged retreat” from their outlying islands. The plan is to concentrate the islands’ 290,000 residents on several dozen, slightly higher islands than the 200 islands that the population is currently spread across.<sup>133</sup>



### 5.3 Immigration policy in less-affected countries

Another determinant of forced migration will be immigration policies in countries less affected by climate change, in particular the OECD countries. Some analysts are beginning to argue that immigration is both a necessary element of global redistributive justice and an important response to climate change; that greenhouse gas emitters should take an allocation of climate migrants in proportion to their historical emissions. Andrew Simms of the New Economics Foundation argues, “Is it right that while some states are more responsible for creating problems like global climate change, all states should bear equal responsibility to deal with its displaced people?”<sup>134</sup>

It has been widely reported that New Zealand has agreed to accept the inhabitants of the South Pacific Island state of Tuvalu if and when climate change leaves their country uninhabitable.<sup>135</sup> However, this is an urban myth: New Zealand only accepts 75 Tuvaluans each year through the immigration service’s Pacific Access Category which makes no reference to environmental degradation. No other country has yet been willing to set a precedent by explicitly accepting climate migrants under a refugee category.

Sweden is the only country even to get close. Swedish immigration policy mentions environmental migrants as a special category as a “person in need of protection” who is unable to return to his native country because of an environmental disaster. However, the extent to which this includes climate change impacts has not yet been clarified. In the parliamentary text explaining the category a nuclear disaster is given as an example of an “environmental disaster” whereas natural disasters are not specifically mentioned.<sup>136</sup>

However, there are increasing examples of immigration concessions for victims of natural disasters – albeit on an ad hoc basis. For example, in 2003 the US immigration service extended for two more years the Temporary Protection Status it granted to 80,000 Hondurans who had fled to the United States after the 1998 Hurricane Mitch which devastated large parts of Central America.<sup>137</sup> The Regional Conference on Migration, which is also known as the “Puebla Process”, played an important role in influencing the US “flexibility” on Temporary protection. Initiated in 1996 the Puebla process is an ongoing regional forum for migration in North and Central America and the Dominican Republic which fosters regular and constructive dialogue on migration issues between the member states.<sup>138</sup>

After the 2004 Tsunami, Switzerland, Canada, and Malaysia temporarily suspended involuntary returns of failed asylum seekers to affected areas of India, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Indonesia. Likewise Australia put a high priority on processing temporary visas for victims and fast-tracking existing applications. The European Union, for its part, proposed offering temporary asylum to child victims of the disaster so as to allow them several months in Europe to recover from the trauma.<sup>139</sup> Whether or not this adds up to an evolving norm of soft law is highly debateable, but it does show some “greyness” at the edges of immigration policy.

There is a dilemma here. Relaxing immigration rules as part of a concerted policy to “release the population pressure” in areas affected by climate change could accelerate the brain drain of talented individuals from the developing world to the developed – and worsen the “hollowing out” of affected economies, which is itself a driver of migration. On the other hand, shutting borders in both source and destination countries undermines remittance economies and denies developing countries the benefits of access to the international labour market.

#### BOX 6

##### FENCING THE BORDER

At the other extreme is India’s 4,095 kilometre fence along the Bangladeshi border. In 1985 a fence along the porous Indian-Bangladesh border was first discussed to stop smuggling, trafficking and illegal immigration (which Delhi estimates at 20 million people annually).<sup>140</sup> Construction started in 2002 and was due to finish in mid-2007. The 3.6 metre high, double wire fence, built at a cost 11 billion rupees also serves the purpose of controlling the flow of future forced climate migrants.<sup>141</sup>

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Environmental, economic and political degradation are connected – though the categories are permeable. One analyst argues, “One classification may cause the other or, more likely, each drives the other in a vicious cycle of reinforcing degradations”.<sup>142</sup> Migration to the United States is an example, “though nominally economic migrants, many of the estimated 1 million people who flood illegally into the United States annually from Mexico are in part driven by declining ecological conditions in a country where 60 per cent of the land is classified as severely degraded”.<sup>143</sup>

Anthropogenic climate change exacerbates existing environmental, economic and social vulnerabilities. It follows that adaptation to climate change has to be broader than tackling the marginal increased impact of anthropogenic climate change. Focusing on the impacts of climate change without factoring in the local context is leading to some bizarre policy distortions. For example, in the Philippines, policymakers have begun to acknowledge the flood threats posed by a projected annual sea level rise from climate change of 1 to 3 millimetres per year. But at the same time they are oblivious to, or ignore, the main reason for increasing flood risk: excessive ground water extraction which is lowering land surface by several centimetres to more than a decimetre per year.<sup>144</sup>

On current climate change scenarios, a certain amount of forced climate migration is “locked in”. But how much depends on the international community’s mitigation and adaptation plans now. It is clear that the international community has to face up to the prospect of large-scale displacement caused by climate change. There is a need for international recognition of the problem, a better understanding of its dimensions and a willingness to tackle it. This should take several forms:

1. The international community needs to acknowledge formally the predicament of forced climate migrants. While it is not clear that an expanded definition of a refugee under international law that included environmental degradation as a “valid” driver of displacement would lead to net benefits for all (traditional and environmental) refugees, some kind of international recognition is required to cement the issue on the international agenda.
2. Development and adaptation policies in potential source countries of forced climate migrants need to focus on reducing people’s vulnerability to climate change, moving people away from marginal areas and supporting livelihoods that are more resilient. In particular more efficient use of existing resources

would offset some of the predicted impacts of climate change. In Pakistan, for example, irrigated agriculture uses 85 per cent of the country's fresh water supply but leakage and evaporation means that it is only 50 to 65 per cent efficient.<sup>145</sup>

3. A great deal more research is needed to understand the causes and consequences of climate migration and to monitor numbers. Practitioners, meanwhile, should develop better communication and working relationships between the different human rights, population, environmental and migration organizations that share a mandate to respond to population displacement.<sup>146</sup>
4. Finally, the international community needs to help generate incentives to keep skilled labour in developing countries but also to allow developing countries to capitalize on the benefits that fluid labour markets can bring. The international regulation of labour migration, adaptation to climate change and capacity building in vulnerable countries are inherently intertwined. Migration will be used by some households in vulnerable countries as a means of adapting to climate change. Clearly there has to be a balance of policies that promotes the incentives for workers to stay in their home countries whilst not closing the door of international labour mobility.

## ENDNOTES

1. This paper draws heavily from a thematic paper prepared for the 2007/2008 Human Development Report of the UNDP, “Fighting climate change: Human solidarity in a divided world”. It is produced with thanks to the UNDP. Please see <http://hdr.undp.org/en/>
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## **ANNEX 1 : THE EMISSION SCENARIOS OF THE IPCC SPECIAL REPORT ON EMISSION SCENARIOS (SRES)<sup>147</sup>**

**A1.** The A1 storyline and scenario family describes a future world of very rapid economic growth, global population that peaks in mid-century and declines thereafter, and the rapid introduction of new and more efficient technologies. Major underlying themes are convergence among regions, capacity building and increased cultural and social interactions, with a substantial reduction in regional differences in per capita income. The A1 scenario family develops into three groups that describe alternative directions of technological change in the energy system. The three A1 groups are distinguished by their technological emphasis: fossil intensive (A1FI), non-fossil energy sources (A1T), or a balance across all sources (A1B) (where balanced is defined as not relying too heavily on one particular energy source, on the assumption that similar improvement rates apply to all energy supply and end use technologies).

**A2.** The A2 storyline and scenario family describes a very heterogeneous world. The underlying theme is self reliance and preservation of local identities. Fertility patterns across regions converge very slowly, which results in continuously increasing population. Economic development is primarily regionally oriented and per capita economic growth and technological change more fragmented and slower than other storylines.

**B1.** The B1 storyline and scenario family describes a convergent world with the same global population, that peaks in mid-century and declines thereafter, as in the A1 storyline, but with rapid change in economic structures toward a service and information economy, with reductions in material intensity and the introduction of clean and resource efficient technologies. The emphasis is on global solutions to economic, social and environmental sustainability, including improved equity, but without additional climate initiatives.

**B2.** The B2 storyline and scenario family describes a world in which the emphasis is on local solutions to economic, social and environmental sustainability. It is a world with continuously increasing global population, at a rate lower than A2, intermediate levels of economic development, and less rapid and more diverse technological change than in the B1 and A1 storylines. While the scenario is also oriented towards environmental protection and social equity, it focuses on local and regional levels.

The SRES scenarios do not include additional climate initiatives, which means that no scenarios are included that explicitly assume implementation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change or the emissions targets of the Kyoto Protocol.



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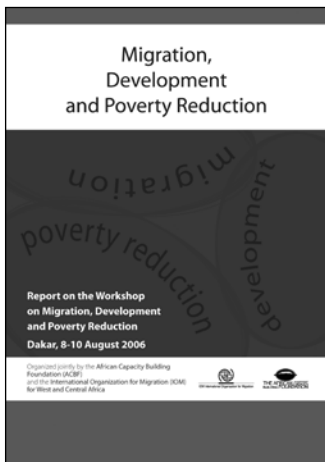
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2007, Softcover, 74 pages, ISBN 978-92-9068-368-1, English, Français

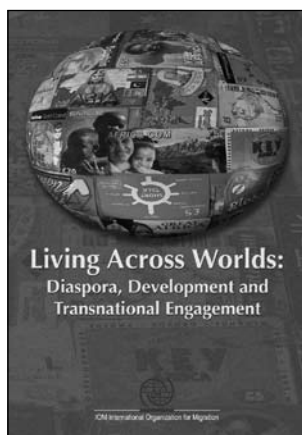
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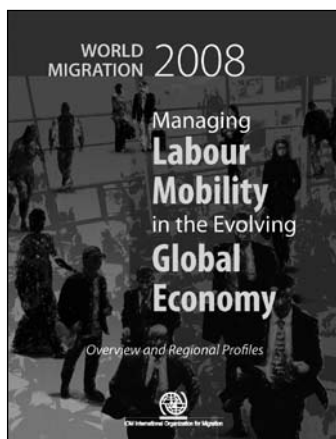
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The study points out that the scientific basis for climate change is increasingly well established, and confirms that current predictions as to the “carrying capacity” in large parts of the world will be compromised by climate change.



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